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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PHUM](#) [KISL](#) [MO](#)
SUBJECT: RENEWED CONTACT WITH THE JCO

REF: 08 RABAT 1169

Classified By: A/DCM Michael DeTar for reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. Fatallah Aarsalane, governing board member of the unrecognized but tolerated Moroccan religious/political organization known as the Justice and Charity Organization (JCO; Arabic: "Al-Adl wal Ihsane"), met with D/PolCouns for a wide-ranging discussion of global issues and internal Moroccan politics. Aarsalane said the JCO and the US share certain similar interests, but he roundly criticized U.S. policy in the Middle East and toward the Islamic world. Turning to internal issues, he said many people associated with the JCO are afraid to acknowledge their affiliation because they would, as a result, be denied employment or other opportunities, echoing sentiments expressed by another JCO member. Moroccan politics and society, he said, are rife with corruption, which has exacerbated the suffering caused to many people by heavy rains and flooding. END SUMMARY.

Shared Values

¶2. (C) JCO governing board member Fatallah Aarsalane met with D/PolCouns on February 16 for a wide-ranging discussion that covered various global issues as well as Moroccan politics. Aarsalane welcomed the meeting, stating his desire to engage with the U.S. Embassy on issues of mutual interest. He said the JCO and the United States share similar goals insofar as both seek to counter extremist Islamist ideology. For Aarsalane the challenge is to ensure that young people with limited education or employment opportunities do not turn to radicalism as a way to express their frustrations. Economic disparities contribute to the problem, he said, which cuts across the rural/urban divide as grinding poverty exists side by side with considerable wealth in many of Morocco's large cities.

Wide-ranging Criticism

¶3. (C) Aarsalane noted that his most recent contact with Embassy personnel had been December 2008 (reftel), "just after the American elections." He said those results were met with hope and anticipation in the Islamic world that a new chapter in U.S.-Middle East relations would ensue, and he expressed disappointment at what he sees as the lack of palpable results following President Obama's Cairo speech and, more generally, his first year in office. The change that Muslims and others hoped for has not materialized, he said, and he went on to criticize the continuing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. He said no weapons of mass destruction were ever found in Iraq, and the invasion was therefore groundless. Acknowledging that efforts are underway to

reduce and pull out U.S. troops, he said nonetheless that the problems besetting Iraq were there before the troops went in and will be there when they leave. He further criticized the United States for not doing more to advance Middle East peace, saying that on the ground there is little difference on this issue between the current administration and the previous one. He did say, however, that U.S. foreign policy is transparent and self-evidently designed to advance U.S. interests, adding that this is in welcome contrast to that of other countries.

14. (C) Turning to internal affairs, Arsalane said Moroccan politics and society are rife with corruption. Many parts of the country, including some areas of large cities, experience extreme poverty, he noted, adding that while the country is not poor, corruption at all levels drains resources. He cited as an example the suffering caused to many people by the current bout of heavy rains and flooding. Corruption makes it worse, he said, because it diverts government funds that could be used to build infrastructure to avoid damage caused by heavy rain, which in many areas washes away peoples' agricultural livelihood. The JCO is working to provide assistance to families suffering due to the flooding.

15. (C) Arsalane went on to say there is no real democracy in Morocco, it is a de facto dictatorship. Were it otherwise, his organization, which claims over one million members, would be able to participate openly in the political life of the country. As it is, members are afraid to acknowledge their affiliation with the JCO because they will be excluded from job, educational, and other opportunities.

A Personal Story

16. (C) In a separate discussion, JCO member Mohammed Laoufir (strictly protect) told of a personal experience that is consistent with Arsalane's assertion that the GOM takes retaliatory measures against JCO members. He described his previous occupation as a religious guide for Moroccan pilgrims on the Hajj, saying he served in this capacity for six years. Another travel agency subsequently recruited him for the same purpose, but, he claimed, for the last three years Moroccan authorities have prevented from leaving the country because of his affiliation with the JCO. Laoufir said the secret police told him the only way he would be allowed to travel and continue working as a guide would be to give up his membership in the JCO. He also said other JCO members or sympathizers--who according to him number upwards of two million--are not given jobs in the police, military, or other security services.

Comment

17. (C) Laoufir related his story matter-of-factly in the course of describing how he became interested in the JCO, but Post has no way to corroborate it. Likewise, we have no way to evaluate claims about how and when the GOM takes action against JCO members to keep them from gaining employment or other opportunities. However, the belief that the GOM retaliates is widespread, just as many of our Islamist contacts share Arsalane's view that democracy in Morocco is weak or non-existent. Indeed, more moderate JCO members see themselves as actively engaged in efforts to strengthen Moroccan institutions or as seeking to help people where the government has failed to do so. Arsalane made no mention of a JCO desire to seek registration as a political party, but his and other members' willingness to engage with the Moroccan people and with Embassy staff suggest they do not seek isolation, either. End comment.

KAPLAN